A critical approach
to the Reggio Emilia Approach[*]

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Abstract

Reggio Emilia is an Italian city internationally known for its toddler centers and preschools (Firlik, 1996). The popularity that the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA) has gained, makes the "Reggio Emilia phenomenon" a global product, subject to global sales strategies (Grieshaber and Hatch, 2003). Worrisome is the tendency to superficially replicate Reggio-like environments, without critical reflection (ibid; Johnson, 2000). This article identifies REA as a culture, according to Jurij Michajlovič Lotman's definition (Lotman, & Uspenskij, 1975). It also analyzes the cultural transposition construct as a tool to transfer REA to different context without losing the deepest meanings and values.

Keywords: Reggio Emilia Approach, educational methods, global approach, cultural transposition, didactical deconstruction.

Resumen
Un enfoque crítico del enfoque Reggio Emilia
Reggio Emilia es una ciudad italiana, conocida en el mundo por su guarderías y escuelas infantiles (Firlik, 1996). La popularidad del enfoque Reggio Emilia (REA) ha convertido el fenómeno Reggio Emilia en un producto global, sometido a estrategias de ventas (Grieshaber and Hatch, 2003). Preocupa también la tendencia a replicar ambientes de estilo Reggio sin una reflexión crítica (ibid; Johnson,

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2000). Este articulo identifica REA como una cultura bajo la definición de Jurij Michajlovič Lotman (Lotman, & Uspenskij, 1975). Analiza también la transposición cultural como una herramienta para transferir REA a diferentes contextos sin perder sus significados y valores más profundos.

Palabras clave: Enforque Reggio Emilia , metodologías educativas, enforque global, transposición cultural, deconstrucción didáctica

1. *Introduction*

Over the past 3 decades, early childhood educators, teachers and researchers around the globe have expressed increasing interest in infant-toddler centers and pre-schools of a small Italian city, Reggio Emilia. The word "Reggio" has become, for many, the "gold standard for quality early childhood education", and, for some, "a catalyst for conversations about a society's responsibility to its youngest citizens" (New, 2007, p. 5).

The proliferation of teachers/educators' study-tours from all over the world, especially from the USA testify to the popularity that this approach has gained. This worldwide movement started, or at least, received international recognition through two main events: Newsweek's feature of Reggio Emilia as offering "the best preschools in the world" (Kantrowitz and Wingert, 1991, p. 51) and the traveling nationwide exhibition of municipal preschool children's work "If the Eye Leaps over the Wall", later renamed "The Hundred Languages of Children" (Firlik, 1996; Moos, 2016).

Several systematic reviews confirm that the Reggio Emilia educational experience (Reggio Emilia Approach, REA) is an increasing topic of interest in international literature within the field of early childhood education (Wals and Petty, 2007; Keskin, 2016).

While there is a registered brand (Reggio Children Approach®), teachers and educators that follow the

REA, especially in Italy, are reluctant to provide any definition or clear declination of a methodology. Particularly, the understanding of REA should emerge from the Reggio-specific mode of documentation, intended to "make learning visible," as it would be without mediation (Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001). These books and pamphlets are so carefully constructed to be considered by some authors as "cultural objects" (Sorzio & Campbell-Barr, 2019), i.e., narratives structured to present the underlying culture.

As a case in point, here is how REA is officially presented:

> The Reggio Emilia Approach® is an educational philosophy based on the image of a child with strong potentialities for development and a subject with rights, who learns through the hundred languages belonging to all human beings and grows in relations with others[1].

This presentation clearly leaves many questions unanswered. Given the variety of cultural and organizational differences, establishing dos and don'ts of a clear-cut method could impair the coherent educational work and the appropriation of the underlying philosophy by educators. Working without specific schema, through a continuous process of meaning making, is harder but the only guarantee to go deep into the philosophy until it becomes a "second skin". The website does provide some praxis that are coherent with the approach, defining them as "founding"

> collegial and relations-based work for all workers; the daily presence of a plurality of educators and teachers with children; the atelier and the person of the atelierista; in-school kitchens; the environment as educator; documentation for making

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[1] https://www.reggiochildren.it/reggio-emilia-approach/.

creative knowledge processes visible; the pedagogical and educational practice co-ordinating group; the participation of families[2].

This set can be interpreted very differently and points to very distinct ideas based on the philosophical framework. They are not a list of ideological principles and philosophical statements. Therefore, there are many different versions of REA inspired schools around the globe. Some scholars outside of Reggio Emilia have created lists of prescriptive actions/ideas (e.g., Robson, 2017), but they are all unofficial. Just looking at website of some REA inspired schools the use of the brand to attract parents, without real understanding of what it represents, is evident.

Could there be a way to prevent this branding without fossilizing the approach into a predigested set of rules? The narratives crafted by REA, pivoting around making children learning visible, do not seem enough to ensure it. This article aims at taking a step in this direction. It presents the construct of cultural transposition and suggests how it could provide some preliminary answers to this question (Ramploud & Mellone, 2018; Mellone et al, 2018).

2. *Some key elements of the Reggio experience*

The philosophy that inspires the methods applied in these Early Childhood Education Services (ECES) has evolved through the years from a partnership between teachers, parents, and educational advisors (Gandini, 1991). In this dynamic growth, Loris Malaguzzi, the first Director of Reggio Emilia's municipal preschools, who was

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[2] Idem.

influenced by a series of thinkers, such as John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Jerome Bruner and Howard Gardner (Gandini, 2011), undoubtedly played a crucial role.

Unlike other educational approaches, such as the Montessori method, there is no prescribed written definition of what constitutes REA. Educators and preschool teachers from Reggio Emilia use to speak of their experience as an attitude, a "provocation and reference point, a way of engaging in dialogue starting from a strong and rich vision of the child" (Edwards, 2003, p. 34).

Despite that, it is possible to identify some recurring key elements referred to the early childhood educational experience of Reggio Emilia (New, 2007, pp. 6-7) in the literature, including: the image of the child as a subject having potential, curiosity, and competence in constructing its own learning; children's multiple symbolic languages as culturally constructed modes of discourse; a long-term project approach to curriculum; the physical environment as a "developmental niche", parental involvement as a form of civic engagement. As influential witnesses of this experience have explained:

> there are rich children and poor children. We [in Reggio Emilia] say that all children are rich, that there are no poor children. All children regardless of their culture, regardless of their lives are rich, better equipped, more talented, stronger and more intelligent than we can assume. (Cagliari *et al.*, 2016, p. 397)

> Rich children are born with a 'hundred languages', the term he used to suggest the many and diverse ways children have of expressing themselves and relating to the world – ranging from manifold forms of art, music and dance to maths, sciences and technologies. (Moss, 2016, p. 171)

> Our task is to construct educational situations that we propose to the children in the morning. It is okay to improvise sometimes but we need to plan the project. It may be a project that is projected over a period of days, or weeks, or even months. We

need to produce situations in which children learn by themselves, in which children can take advantage of their own knowledge and resources autonomously, and in which we guarantee the intervention of the adult as little as possible. (Malaguzzi, 1994, p. 54)

Beside official declaration, it is evident that an approach that rethinks itself daily during the educational work in schools, faces strong difficulties in remaining true to itself, especially once moved somewhere else. The daily documentation and reflection upon it, made in communal schools in Reggio Emilia, ensures that this cocktail of educational praxis, most of which have not been invented in Reggio Emilia, but only combined and enhanced here, stays coherent and creates a unique educational environment, that is perceived by all visitors. The question is whether this cocktail, whose recipe is so clearly environmentally and culturally specific, can be duplicate, keeping its flavor and meaning.

3. *Reggio Emilia: a global phenomenon*

The growth of international interest made the Reggio Emilia phenomenon a global product, subject to global sales strategies and market perspectives. Teachers and educators from all over the world, fueled by conferences and well-known early childhood scholars, developed the desire to re-create aspects of the Reggio Emilia experience in their own schools. As Grieshaber and Hatch argued (2003, 95), the popularity of Reggio Emilia can be interpreted within the U.S.:

through models of consumption and desire that are often associated with American institutions like McDonald's, Hollywood and CNN – instead of ensuring that you "Mac your day," teachers passionately set about to "Reggio their program."

According to this, some authors presented "Reggio" as a buzzword in the field of early childhood education and argued that the pedagogical approach from Reggio Emilia stands in danger of being "disneyfied" (Johnson, 1999), namely absorbed and simplified into a standardized format that is extensively recognizable (Wright, 2000; Matusitz and Palermo, 2014). Similarly, others are concerned about the seemingly uncritical transfer of ideas and preferences into their professional practice, embodied in the tendency to superficially replicate Reggio-like environments, without sufficient in-depth attention to the critical reflection on the meanings of these practices and how things might work in different ways within unique and situated expressions of the Reggio-inspired pedagogy (Grieshaber and Hatch, 2003). This infatuation:

> reveals a quick-fix attitude, an unwillingness to intellectualize important issues in our field, higher education's ability to 'dummy down' the field of early childhood education (Johnson, 2000, p. 69)

A quick analysis made in June 2021 to compare records concerning the two popular Italian approaches/methods to ECE in ERIC (Education Resources Information Center)[3] revealed that, as we might expect, Montessori historically wins for the number of contributes, but as we can see in Tab. 1, the balance between the two has been changing rapidly, especially in the last 10 to 5 years and at the moment the two are equal, or we can say that Reggio is overtaking Montessori.

TAB. 1. Numbers of records in ERIC tagged as Reggio Emilia Approach (REA) or Montessori Method (MM)

[3] https://eric.ed.gov.

	REA	MM	REA+MM	REA/ (REA+MM)	MM/ (REA+MM)
In 2021	4	3	7	0,57	0,43
Since 2020	21	18	39	0,54	0,46
Since 2017 (last 5 years)	80	109	189	0,42	0,58
Since 2012 (last 10 years)	158	342	500	0,32	0,68
Since 2002 (last 20 years)	303	618	921	0,33	0,67
Since 1968/1989	440	1099	1539	0,29	0,71

4. *Cultural transposition*

The task of applying the same didactical approach to different context is not an easy one. If we look closely to the expression 'different educational context' we realize that it is much broader than it could appear at first. Obviously considering a preschool in sub-Saharan Africa and one in any western country, there are no doubts that the cultural context is different. We might even agree that even countries from the same geographical area will have different cultural background and therefore educational settings. Yet, do schools located in the same country or even more in the same town present "different educational context"? Each school does present a different educational context, determined by its history, organizational setting, neighborhood, instructional styles, vision of teachers, students, families, and many other intangible aspects (Rinaldi, 2005; Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999; Small, 2009). It appears in all evidence even in Reggio Emilia, when state, private and communal schools are compared.

This application of a didactical approach to new context is even harder for REA given that there is no formal definition of tools, experiences, or projects.

REA has many treats in common with Lotman's definition of culture as a complex "semantic system" made by different interlaced linguistic signs (Lotman, & Uspenskij, 1975). REA is characterized by strong philosophical ideas, structured around linguistic signs. The competent child, environment as third educator, participation to establish the equal rights of children, teachers and parents, dialogue as interaction not only among people, but also between people natural objects and artificial ones, the 100 languages, are some of such interlaced linguistic signs that compose the complex semantic system REA is. There are many 'concepts' and 'expressions, used daily in REA schools, that have little meaning in other educational contexts (also in Italy)[4]. This system cannot simply be translated into other cultural contexts, without losing its essence, because the characteristics linguistic signs get their meaning by their interconnections, and from the system. The risk is that the meaning making process will be lost in translation.

Sorzio and Campbell-Barr (2019, p. 2) argued that:

> When the participants in a cultural practice are engaged in a process of reflection, selection, and abstraction of their relevant experiences, they activate a process of "metaculture" that produces cultural objects.

The authors identify Reggio-specific mode of documentation, namely "ministories" (short narratives about the children's thinking during meaningful experiences with objects) and "projects" (publications that documents

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[4] "Rilanci", "progettazione didattica", "libera esplorazione", "piazza", "assemblea", "pensare con le mani," just to give a few examples.

the unfolding of educational projects) as cultural objects "that make the Reggio approach visible, understandable, and comparable with other experiences". The documentation structure is very similar in all REA publications, as they are crafted to present certain aspects of REA and making them visible and appliable everywhere. The authors analyze some of these narratives and show how they are carefully crafted to convey the image of a competent child, who learns by exploring reality and transforming his mental schemas based on the challenges he faces in his exploration. The adults are in the background and listen carefully. Their purpose is to make visible the pupils learning process.

Can books and publications really be a way to present REA and give tools to educators to apply its principles outside of Reggio Emilia communal preschools and toddler centers? Would or are they enough to keep the approach's semantic value intact? According to Sorzio and Campbell-Barr, the narratives are not omni comprehensive. They select few images and frame only some of the interactions between child and adult:

> the fine-grained interactional situation is not available, and therefore it is difficult to appreciate the whole structure of children's participation, that is, the set of educational presuppositions that orient the participants in the appropriate interpretation of the discursive acts in a communicative situation, the register of speaking and the culturally appropriate frames of reference (Sorzio & Campbell-Barr, 2019, p. 7)

A lot of references, background, reflections are purposely lost to convey few central ideas. The authors conclude that the message is powerful enough to give worldwide a different perspective on ECEC from the standardized services usually available. Yet, much depth is lost when the same ideas and principles of a competent child and reflexive adults are simply moved from Reggio

Emilia to another context. Especially critical is the role of the adults. How much he/she should intervene to support children's explorations without derailing them? How can an effective "rilancio", an "extended question" aimed at promoting further exploration, be structured? Further issues relate to how to document learning process, and how to reflect upon them, offering new possibilities to children. How does the role of participating parents play out in the everyday life of services? These are just a few aspects that could change once "embodied" in a different context.

A real change in praxis according to REA needs more than just knowledge on theoretical framework. Otherwise, the risk is applying superficial changes that would leave much of the underlying structures untouched. The construct of cultural transposition seen "as a condition for decentrallizing the didactic practice of a specific cultural context through contact with the didactic practices of different cultural contexts" (Mellone et al, 2018, p.199), would seem to provide a better answer to the needs of applying REA out of Reggio Emilia communal schools without losing meaning. Its potential needs to be analyzed in deeper details.

Transposition implies placing something in a new context while keeping a trace of this movement, of the passing. It bears the idea of "a transition from some initial condition" (Mellone et al, 2019, p.201) determined by the interaction of the linguistic signs of the two systems. It involves a transaction among the two.

This transaction has Jacques Derrida's "deconstruction movement" at its core (Derrida, 1967). As Mellone et al. (2018, p. 201) argued:

> Derrida developed the idea of deconstruction as a process that arises as an attitude that serves to continually deconstruct a culture, that is, to put in place a radical critique.

This radical critique aims at analyzing the different layers in which a culture is stratified. This operation is a precondition to isolate each level and allow a reflection on it. This critique provides the tools the cultural transposition needs. Only by deconstructing aspects of source and target culture and reflecting on differences can a real cultural transposition take place. A move that does not try to parachute a stratified culture into another, the way a translation would, but through a reflective action, understand the deeper meaning, the intentionality of another practice to rethink its own. Specifically, Ramploud and Mellone have applied what they call didactical deconstruction to teachers' training. Teachers exposed to didactical praxis from different cultural contexts, start deconstructing them to rethink their own. Researchers and teachers together could find the stratified layers of their own praxis and adapt it welcoming possible change. The process takes the form of a metaphorical dialogue between different educational practices, that brings to the foreground each teaching choice, through the awareness that things, somewhere else are done differently (Mellone et al, 2018, p. 202).

> This is not about comparative philosophy, about paralleling different conceptions, but about a philosophical dialogue in which every thought, when coming towards the other, questions itself about its own unthought.

There is an active movement toward the other, having already accepted our differences, with a willingness "to play strings not yet, or no longer, touched" (Jullien in Mellone et al, 2018, p.202). Cultural transposition implies a deeper understanding of oneself and the others. It involves questioning our praxis to understand not just their effectiveness, but the intentionality behind them and

revisiting them, transposing the rationale behind someone else's praxis that better suits our needs.

5. *A possible implementation*

During the 2020-21 school year some teachers from a state-run primary school in Reggio Emilia (Renzo Pezzani) decided to redesign the school garden to create a teachable space. Teachers realized that to accomplish a lasting transformation they needed to rethink their didactic, their approach to the outdoor and deeply involve parents. First step had to be a change in didactic through reflective professional training. University researchers, environmental guides and the neighborhood association became partners to co-design and carry out the training and redesign the courtyard (Pintus & Landi, 2021).

As the project came into life the university researchers realized that the project architecture posed a challenge to the cultural framework of this state-run primary school. The first challenge was parents' involvement. In a state-run primary school in Italy parents' participation is limited to specific settings and occasions. It often involves listening to information provided by teachers about each individual child. Families' involvement in training, decision making, activities is very limited, often inexistant. As teachers tried to foster a deeper involvement, they struggled to find a theoretical framework and adequate praxis to do so.

Another problematic aspect became how to make pupils' outdoor learning visible. Teachers used to blackboards and controlled indoor learning environment struggled to find tools for assessment and evaluation outdoor. Assessment of new transversal competences that pupils could develop outdoor became even more problematic. Moreover, accepting risks and the new esthetic of the

outdoor discoveries posed further challenges. The traditional tools and praxis teachers had developed throughout their career were not enough to manage outdoor complexity.

REA infant-toddler centers educators' and preschools teachers' strategies and praxis could become a guide to the project, but not directly. This implementation of REA in primary schools had been tried before. The results have been either nice single projects that have left little trace in the didactic, or blunt refusal by state teachers to apply any suggestions. The use of cultural transposition and didactical deconstruction of REA to re-think at praxis could change this outcome. They could become a key methodology supporting the project future.

For instance, according to the REA "participation" is a right recognize to all 3 school stakeholders: children, families, and school staff. It involves co-designing of learning experiences, joint decision making, reflecting on education as a collective effort involving a group of children and adults, rather than an individual path. In Malaguzzi's own words:

> Such a cooperative network of multiple interactive processes, entrusted to the contribution of ideas and abilities from each individual and all those involved — and always open to experimentation and modification […] is a model that not only gives new life to the roles of the school and the family, but also deeply affects and reinforces the social forms of the construction and reconstruction of knowledge, representing for children something that is alive and stimulating (1993, pp. 5-6).

As they decided to implement the collaborative re-design of the outdoor school space, the primary teachers involved realized they needed to build an alliance with parents and pupils. Parents needed to share the educational intentionality, understand the differences between didactic in and outdoor and accept the risks that are part

of any outdoor experiences. Moreover, such a shift could only be effective if both parents and pupils understood aims and potentials of outdoor education. In REA effective and active participation starts with common reflection and experience guided by school staff. In primary school usually teachers provide this guidance. In this case, as they also need outdoor training, they could extend the learning opportunity to parents and children together. As it is the case in REA, the sharing of experiences and ideas creates the common background and reflection needed to start designing the courtyard together. The process could be sustained through regular meetings and common decision making, in contrast to primary school usual top-down approach to management.

6. *Conclusion*

On one hand, Reggio Emilia exists as a city, that is a geographical, historical, and administrative place; on the other hand, REA also exists as a global phenomenon that has been co-created by the media.

The history of this educational experience begins with the resistance against fascism regime in Italy and the role of a number of civil society movements, first and foremost the Union of Italian Women (UDI) during the post-II world war rebuilding (New, 1993). It is in this scenario that it is necessary to situate the philosophy and the practices developed and adopted in the Reggio Emilia schools. As Renzo Bonazzi (mayor of the city from 1962 to 1976) used to remember, 20 years of fascist regime had taught "that people who conformed and obeyed were dangerous, and that in building a new society it was imperative to […] nurture a vision of children who can think and act for themselves" (Dahlberg, 2000, p. 177). What the people wanted were schools that "set out to free the children from an age-old subjection by the official

schools, which had always awarded the privilege of birth" (Barazzoni, 2018, p. 51).

It is in this historical and cultural contest, post-II world war Italy, that in the early 60s the municipality of Reggio Emilia became an active part of a left-wing administrations movement from Northern and Central part of Italy that decided to assume responsibility for pre-school education, as a secular alternative to the dominant position of religious schools (Moss, 2016). Over time, during the second part of the twentieth century, the city councils that have administered the city in cultural and political continuity, in dialogue with several secular civil society movements, have developed an administrative culture of ECES, whose outcomes (practical applications) are admired all over the world.

An in-depth study of the origins and the evolution over time of this system of ECES is necessary. It would prevent the loss of important historical facts – only partially recollected – and help understanding the assumptions (goals, ideas and meanings) that constitute the base for what has become the so-called "Reggio Emilia Approach" or philosophy of the "Hundred Languages". This process of inquiry must drive the reflection on the existence of "Reggio" as a childhood model of education.

As White (1999, pp. 224-225) pointed out, Reggio Emilia is "the model that isn't a model" since it consistently seeks to deconstruct itself. Its qualitative difference from other pedagogical methods lies in this fact. Despite this challenging qualifying aspect that may be associated with postmodernism, incredibly, there are only a few proper theoretical analyses of the REA (Dahlberg, 2000; Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999) and even fewer critical analyses of its adoption outside of Reggio Emilia (Grieshaber & Hatch, 2003).

The construct of cultural transposition represents an important step in this direction. It helps identifying REA

as a complex semantic system and provides a theoretical framework for didactical deconstruction and transposition to other contexts. Even when the context is a neighboring state school. The reflective process involved is coherent with REA postmodernist framework. It grants application of REA that will not dilute meanings and will respect both source and target culture.

Only bridging these gaps of knowledge through appropriate forthcoming research – regarding the history of ECES organizational and management model of Reggio Emilia, and the critical analysis, both at a macro and micro level, of the theoretical and philosophical assumptions of the REA – may provide the background needed for didactical deconstruction. Then a reflexive dialogue between Reggio Emilia schools and the context seeking inspiration can start and be grounded in the cultural transposition construct. This reflexive process would in turn shed further light on this complex didactical approach.

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